

THE CURATORSHIP OF CULTURAL OBJECTS IN INDONESIA¹

MIKKE SUSANTO

Art Curator, Lecturer at Indonesian Institute of Art - ISI Yogyakarta

Let's take a close look at the painting above (Slide 2), especially the inscriptions that are in frame. The text there can be read as follows:

The first of May, anno 1598. Mauritius, Holland, Ovrissel, and Vrieslant; Four Ships that sailed forth together to Bantam to fetch spices, planted the seeds of commerce there, and returned with their ample load to Amsterdam. The nineteenth of July anno 1599.

This painting is quite interesting. It's not only aesthetic, but historic and important. This painting offers a polarizing discourse. It's not just a spice hauler, but also represents a general upheaval. In addition to describing the transport of foodstuffs amidst the ocean waves, this painting also indicates the transfer of science, the transfer of tastes, and the massive transfer of modern culture to the Archipelago. It can also be revealed that the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC), though an expansive economic institution, was also a mediator of culture and art involved in the misguided delivery of a number of European painters to the Archipelago between 1600 and 1900.

Curatorial Work

Many expert said that word of “curator” known in Indonesia in 90s. But actually, curatorial work had been known for along time. In understanding the development of curatorship (especially in Indonesia), one must explore in advance the history of the art involved. Cornelisz's painting above could be seen as an important piece of art history. At the very least, Cornelisz's painting can be considered a visual record or early trace of the arrival of the Dutch in the archipelago, a mark of painters' role in the realm of culture. Painting, in this case, is a historical record, evidence of the development of the curatorial world of art.

In addition to looking at the works themselves, we also need to see exhibitions as important in tracing the history of art. One distinguishing element of exhibitions lies in their particular (curatorial) concepts. Even while enjoying the materials presented in the

¹ “International Webinar & Workshop on Javanese Culture”, Kraton Yogyakarta, 10th July - 1st August 2021.

curatorial space, the vision/mission or concept of the exhibition must be understood as significant. With this knowledge, the ultimate goal of an exhibition can be identified and distinguished.

In the traditional sense, quoting from *Webster's New 20th Century Dictionary*, “curation” comes from Latin *cura*, via *curatum* (“to take care of”). As such, it means to maintain or care for something, and a curator is someone who maintains, pays attention to, and supervises something (often public libraries, museums, fine art collections, and its kind). (Slide 3) In *The Concise Oxford Thesaurus* (1995), the term *curator* has a similar definition: “keeper, custodian, conservation, guardian, caretaker, steward of an artifact“. In general, when associated with museums and libraries (read: institutions that store documents or cultural objects), curatorial duties include the maintenance, conservation, classification, selection and presentation of artifacts. As such, curatorship includes specific skills within such fields as art, aesthetics, materials science, chemistry and art criticism.

Over time, the function and definition of curatorship experienced de-professionalization. Originally, curators acted as devices of their museum, being the creators of their exhibition; over time, some began acting outside of museums, becoming what are known as independent curators. This de-professionalization may be attributed to the deregulation of work access, as well as the deinstitutionalization of curatorship itself.

Today, curators are also catalysts. This profession brings together artists, managers, and audiences. Following Hans Jorg Furst, “Material Culture Research and the Curation Process”, a work cycle diagram of the curation process is presented below. These components (Slide 4) interact in certain cycle relationships:

1. Cultural context (*object in context*), an object and its background (before curation).
2. Curation process, a state where an object is decontextualized or experiences a new perspective.
3. Comparative analysis, wherein an object is compiled, analyzed and researched.
4. Interpretation, where the object is re-contextualized (*object re-contextualism*) following the intention, purpose, or vision of the exhibition.

Curatorial Work in Indonesia

If understanding curatorial work using traditional and contemporary perspectives, a number of curation models can be identified in Indonesia. (Slide 5) To explore the “history” of the curation cultural objects, it is necessary to understand in advance the relationship between curatorial discourse and several fields. Exploring the relationship between curatorial work and: (1) exhibitions, (2) collections, and (3) museums is very appropriate for understanding the community’s processes of cultural appreciation. It is also important to mark the extent to which curation has taken place in Indonesia.

After teasing out these links, curation work can be easily reviewed. Various key events have occurred in Indonesia and affected curatorial work. The Archipelago's occupation by European nations (mainly the Dutch) marked the beginning of an important story. Here are several events that have marked the curation of cultural objects in Indonesia over the last three centuries.

1. **(Slide 6)** *Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap der Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences). Founded in 1778, it's now the National Museum of Indonesia. **(Slide 7)** This museum handles collection, maintenance, selection, and presentation. Artifacts collected include manuscripts, statue, parts of temples, etc.
2. **(Slide 8)** Non-institutional events, such as painting auctions. One example is presented in a watercolor by J.C. Rappard, *Vendutie* ("Auction", 20.5x28.5 cm, c. 1842–1872). This work shows that a system of selection, socialization, presentation, and competition existed for the sale of paintings at that time. The artist, Rappard, is known to have come in 1842 to document the topography of the Dutch East Indies, as well as the social and cultural lives of Europeans therein. He left Indonesia in 1872 and died in 1898.
3. **(Slide 9)** *The Zoological Museum of Bogor*, founded by the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences. The museum holds many natural and cultural artifacts, especially related to animals, and curated them through collection, maintenance, and exhibition. In 1894, was established as the *Landbouw Zoologisch Laboratorium* (Zoological Laboratory) by J.C. Koningsberger, a Dutch botanist. In 1901 a new building was constructed as a collection room, exhibition hall, and laboratory. The building's name has changed per its function, more than ten times as of 2000.
4. **(Slide 10)** *Nederlandsch-Indische Kunstkring*, the "Art Circle of the Dutch East Indies", was established on April 1, 1902, in Batavia. **(Slide 11)** By 1916 it had seven affiliates, in Batavia, Buitenzorg, Deli Serdang, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Semarang. By 1927, a total of 26 affiliates and 2 associations were attested, including in Medan, and Makassar. The Circle exhibited and curated many cultural objects (batik, carvings, kris, statues, etc.), from the traditional to the modern works. **(Slide 12)** Previously, in December 1900, a group of Dutch artists and writers had banded together to help mediate the development of arts and crafts; their main patron was W. Rooseboom, the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. Eventually, the Circle's exhibitions became a spectacle for the Dutch elite and other residents of the Dutch East Indies, as it provided a business space and means of learning for contemporary artists, like Emil Rizek and van Gogh.

5. **(Slides 13)** Art bazaars or cultural festivals are important parts of history to attribute here. Examples include the Exhibition of Antiques and Collections in Bazaar Ambonia, held from August 20–29, 1905; World Expo Koloniale Tentoonstelling, celebrating the centennial of the Netherlands' independence from France, held in Semarang from August 13 to November 15, 1914; and **(Slides 14)** the *Nederlandsch Indisch Jaarbeurs* ("night culture market"), held in Bandung from May 20 to June 3, 1920. A similar festival was held on September 9, 1923, in Pekalongan, and featured works made from silver, batik, ceramic, bronze, tin, iron, rubber, etc. Other crafts festivals and exhibitions were held in Surabaya (1905–1909) and Yogyakarta (1928–1929). Such festivals provided public meeting space for people from all fields, from the culinary to the performing arts.
6. **(Slide 15)** Sonobudoyo Museum in Yogyakarta was established in 1934. Founded after the Java Institute was established in Surakarta in 1919. The Committee for the Establishment of Sonobudoyo Museum with members including Ir. Th. Karsten, P.H.W. Sitsen, and Koeperberg. This museum continues to function to maintain and exhibit cultural artifacts found in Java, Madura, Bali and Lombok.
7. **(Slide 16)** Poesat Keboedayaan (also known as *Keimin Bunka Shidōsho*) was established in April 1943 at Jl. Noordwijk 39, Jakarta. Exhibitions were held by *Shidōsho* in major cities in Java. In 1944, the *Asia Raya* newspaper noted that Poesat Keboedayaan had organized 14 exhibitions.
8. **(Slide 17)** The Presidential Palace of the Republic of Indonesia, established in 1946 in Yogyakarta. Several presidential palace located in Yogyakarta, Jakarta, Bogor, Cipanas, Tampaksiring Bali, and Pelabuhan Ratu West Java. Soon after Indonesia's independence was proclaimed on August 17, 1945, President Sukarno offered the idea of "the palace as a museum". During his time as president, Sukarno appointed several 'Palace Painters' to act as curator; in the 1950s, this was Dullah, while in the 1960s the Palace Painters included Lee Man-fong and Lim Wasim. In the post-Sukarno era, an area was established under the Ministry of State Secretary to hold art objects.
9. **(Slide 18)** Balai Budaya Jakarta was established by the National Cultural Consultative Council (*Badan Musawarat Kebudayaan Nasional* - BMKN) on April 14, 1954. This institution presents fine works of batik and painting by Indonesian and foreign artists.
10. **(Slides 19)** Private galleries/museums and alternative spaces scattered throughout Java and Bali. Such spaces are numerous, and new ones are established (and close) regularly. **(Slides 20)** Examples (1940s–present) include G. Kolf & Co., Batavia; Hotel Des Indes, Jakarta; Balai Seni Rupa Merdeka, Jakarta; Pandey's Gallery, Bali;

Hadiprana's Gallery, Jakarta; Art Gallery Senisono Yogyakarta; Bentara Budaya; Affandi Museum; Dullah Museum; Edwin's Gallery Jakarta; Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta; MOHD; and MACAN. All are curated independently, and their owners and managers act as curators, artists, and executive curators.

11. **(Slide 21)** Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM), Jakarta. This art center, established on November 10, 1968, was built by Ali Sadikin during his term as Governor of Jakarta. This institution received curatorial support from members of the Jakarta Arts Council, who also acted as managers. Umar Khayam and Ajib Rosidi can be mentioned as member of Akademi Jakarta and as a curators who actively played a role in the institution's development.
12. **(Slide 22)** National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, established in 2005. This institution was previously known as the Exhibition Building of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, that officiated by Prof. Dr. Fuad Hasan in February 23, 1987. Now, National Gallery collected painting, sculpture and contemporary artworks of Indonesia.
13. **(Slide 23)** In addition to art spaces, many events have also contributed to the evolution of curatorship in Indonesia. National and international programs in Indonesia or abroad, as well as physical and virtual exhibitions, have included the Istiqlal Festival, Jakarta Biennale, Biennal Jogja, Artjog, Art Moment and Ruang Rupa for Documenta 2022 for example.

Issues, Expectations & Opportunities

After identifying the above events, I propose several important things to do immediately. **(Slide 24)**

1. Indonesia requires a lot of human resources in the field of curatorship. By far the most dynamic curatorial field remains the realm of visual art, and Indonesian art curators have even worked internationally. At the same time, however, the collections and museums of Indonesia are in desperate need of individuals who are able to work in the field of curatorial and cultural conservation. Such efforts can be undertaken through academic and non-academic channels, be they in art, history, art management, or other supporting sciences. The government is highly expected to play a role in this process.
2. Indonesia has a variety of cultural objects, and these in extraordinary quantities. Although some have been brought abroad, the cultural objects still held in Indonesia today (e.g. in Kraton Yogyakarta) requires curatorial work and sustainable cultural governance.

3. There is a need for an effective model for preserving and curating cultural objects in Indonesia. This concept of preservation needs to be discussed to ensure the continued maintenance of collected objects, recognizing that the cultural objects that exist in Indonesia serve not only as display materials *an sich*, but are also used by the community for spiritual and social purposes.
4. Cultural objects in Indonesia have been partially researched, inventoried, socialized, and transferred from the physical to the digital. Digitization needs to be done as part of the archiving process. From archiving, an annotated catalogue can be made easily and accessible without damaging the object. (Slide 25) Such activities are necessary to mitigate the effects of various potential issues in the future, ranging from disasters to asset theft, as well as to provide for insurance, conservation, and restoration. Asset pricing is also part of curatorial work. To date, it has been primarily by the Ministry of State Secretary, and this only on collectibles in the Presidential Palace. Other ministries have yet to conduct asset pricing.
5. Curation work is expected to draw the public and interest it more in local culture and wisdom. In the case of the collection of Kraton Yogyakarta (and similar palaces in the Archipelago), for example, a more distinctive curatorial approach is required. As a Javanese cultural institution, one replete with Javanese traditions, Kraton Yogyakarta must be interpreted not only through a formal-objective approach, but also through sociological and mythological narratives. Deconstruction and de-contextualization are indispensable for balancing the local and the global.
6. Digital media, such as social media, digital marketplaces, and the NFT, can provide benefits to curators and cultural objects themselves. Therefore, further discussion of how these media can be integrated into curatorial work to ensure that cultural objects can be maintained and contribute to the world's cultural wealth.

After this discussion, this paper concludes with a painting as well. (Slide 26). It depicts the rising (or setting) of the sun at the end of the world. Presenting the concepts of transition, transformation, and ongoing work, even in calm conditions, it is moving with simplicity yet still beautifully felt. Felix Gonzales's painting manages to touch on local wisdom, the simultaneous preservation of nature and culture. It shows that there's still an opportunity to improve, including in the realm of curatorship. Enjoy and thank you. +++